

Beijing to Shanghai

Riding Eastern China
on Banned Big Bikes



Derrick King

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*Front Cover: Highway Between Dezhau and Jinan
Back Cover: China Ride 2010 Promotional Poster*

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Planning

In August 2010 Singapore bike club Team 27 organized a fly-ride big bike tour from Beijing to Shanghai with the support of a Chinese travel agency. The plan was to ride 1740 km in 14 Days. 28 bikes were shipped from Singapore, roughly 1/3 BMW, 1/3 Harley-Davidson, 1/3 Japanese, and one Ducati. It was the club's second motorcycle tour in China. The first ride, along the same route, was in 1994 with 43 bikes; that was said to be the first foreign-organized big bike rally in China.

The club had hoped for participation from as many bikes in 2010 as in 1994 but despite promotion including a website and presentations to potential advertiser-sponsors and other clubs, the level of interest was much lower from both riders and sponsors fifteen years later.

The high cost was a factor: at about US\$470 nett per day per rider it was by far the most expensive trip per day that I ever took anywhere, by any means of transport. But, mainly, it seems eastern China is not seen as an interesting and exotic riding destination anymore—for good reason, as it turned out.

Because an overland ride all the way from Singapore via Laos would have been too time-consuming for most participants the bikes were shipped by ocean freight to Beijing then shipped back to Singapore from Shanghai.

In China the bikes followed in convoy behind a minivan which carried the Chinese travel agents who dealt with toll booths, highway police, and other en-route logistics. Meanwhile a 40-seat intercity tourist coach and a truck for any disabled bikes followed behind the convoy; by the end of the tour, two Harleys and the Ducati would break down and be rolled into the truck. The coach was used to carry luggage for some riders, to transport seven non-riding spouses and friends, and to take all of us on guided tours and to and from restaurants far from the remote suburban hotels where the bikes had to be parked.

In China (as of 2010), big bikes are regulated like horses, bicycles, and electric scooters so they are forbidden from expressways, highways, and major avenues. Large cities forbid or restrict all motorcycles from entering the downtown core, unless electric.

All riding had to be on pre-approved major arteries and all our hotels had to be outside of downtown; we could not ride to any tourist sites on the

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motorcycles. We could walk around or take public transport on our own but we could not ride our motorcycles around on our own. The whole trip was a freeway ride.

This was because we could not be issued Chinese license plates, and so our bikes were illegal to ride. Singapore motorcycles are not allowed temporary importation under Carnet or under the Mekong Cross-border Transport Agreement; exceptions are granted only for projects sufficiently meaningful to the authorities.

In Beijing only motorcycles registered within Beijing can be legally ridden, and it is not possible to register any motorcycle larger than 400cc; this is said to be because citizens cannot have motorbikes more powerful than the 400cc bikes ridden by the police.

We were told that all big bikes are illegal in many places in China but the Chinese police look the other way as long as the riders behave themselves. BMW, Harley-Davidson, and Ducati all have dealers in Beijing, but the machines are very rare on the road given their legal Limbo.

Because of the restrictive regulations, the logistics of the ride were complex and expensive, requiring negotiation with and special permits from six government authorities who in turn required police escorts for several sections of the route. The permits and police escorts all had to be paid for; these facilitation payments were a significant part of our tour cost.

The Itinerary:

Day 1-3: Fly to Beijing and collect bikes. Sightsee Beijing.

Day 4: Ride to Dezhou via Tianjin and Changzhou (390 km).

Days 5-6: Ride to Jinan (117 km). Sightsee.

Day 7: Ride to Tai'An (88 km). Tai'An cablecar.

Day 8: Ride to Xuzhou (300 km).

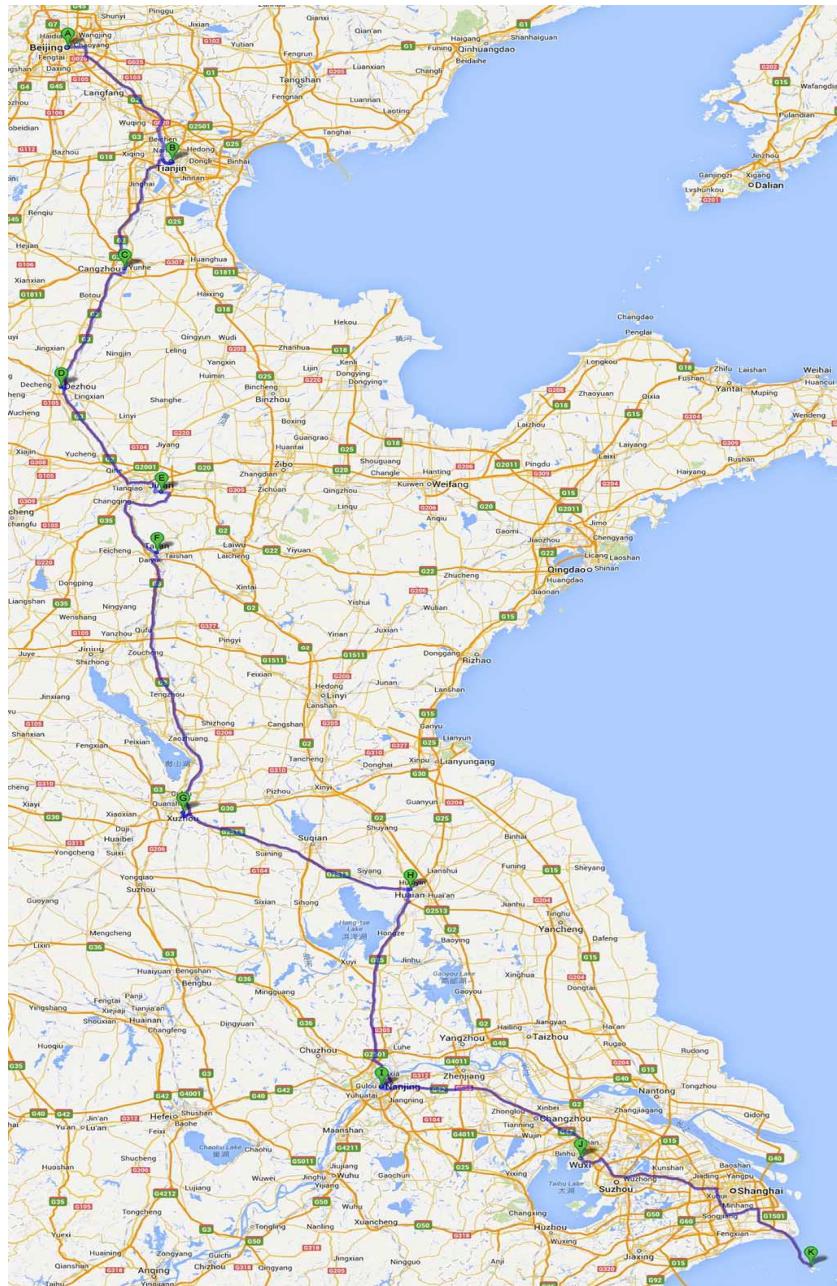
Days 9-10: Ride to Nanjing via Huaian (415 km). Sightsee.

Day 11: Ride to Wuxi (230 km).

Days 12-14: Ride to Shanghai (200 km) and leave bikes at the container port. Sightsee Shanghai. Fly home to Singapore.

The route is on the following page.

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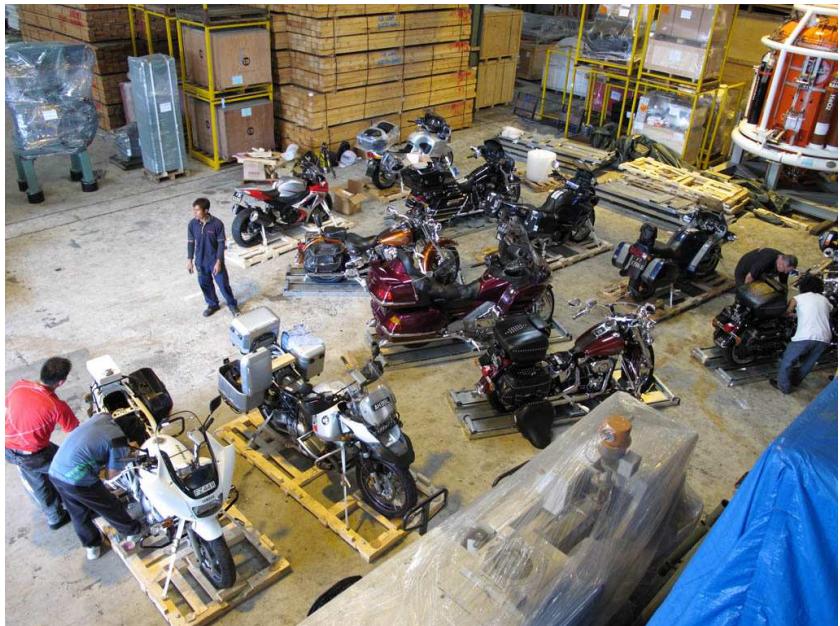


Shipping the Motorcycles

In Singapore the fuel tanks had to be drained and the batteries disconnected. All the panniers had to be left unlocked to permit customs inspection. The bikes were strapped onto custom-made pallets and loaded into shipping containers.



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The trip attracted some publicity in Singapore:

早報 新加坡

04 **Zaobao SINGAPORE 聚合早報** 2010年7月12日 星期一

“27队”28成员包括3女车手下月出发

骑电单车游中国

队长何日昇表示，1994年组团骑单车游览中国后，1997年计划再次出行，但因金融风暴，赞助商退出，计划搁置。如今历时两年的筹备，这场名为“驾驶摩、游神州，观世博”的骑行终于再次展开。

胡丽珊 报导

由大型电单车“发烧友”组成的业余俱乐部“27队”(Team 27)计划16年，将在下个月再度远赴中国，28名骑手介于25岁至69岁的年龄，将有来自美国、日本、韩国、马来西亚、印度尼西亚、香港、澳门、台湾等地的车手，一同参加这次骑行活动，帮助当地的孩子。

“27队”作为本世纪历史最悠久的单车俱乐部，成立已25年。当年因为经常在摩托车赛场上得名，称为“三强”，车手都是当年从马来西亚回国的其他骑手。车队在27队的带动下，开始有越来越多的车手选择骑单车出行，一同参加慈善活动，帮助当地的孩子。

“27队”队长何日

昇(56岁)表示，队员超过193人，但目前领骑单车的车手只有28人，希望得到更多的支持，但碍于资金问题，赞助商退出，计划搁置。如今历时两年的筹备，这场名为“驾驶摩、游神州，观世博”的骑行终于再次展开。

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“27队”队长何日

昇上场，吸引天津港、青

海，筹备过程困难重重。

天津港社报道，大型电单车在当月仍停靠，大货车几乎不能准确地在公路上行驶，能够把车开进途中，将全副武装的巡逻达，而向西驶去。车队的领骑者，可

以从队伍中脱颖而出，

还能享受最好的待遇，

中国整车全程报道

在执行任务时，

中国公安部门这次的监

察路上几乎不能准

确地行驶，能够把

车开进途中，将全副武

装的巡逻达，而向西

驶去。车队的领骑者，

可以从中脱颖而出，

还能享受最好的待遇，



“27队”自1994年远赴中国后，对于大型电单车的热忱丝毫没有减退，将再度挑

战当地的公路。(林国明摄)

莉·李·罗拉(48岁)以及车队最年轻的成员黄慕多(25岁)。

黄慕多说：“我第一次骑电单车是在去年的圣诞节，她也骑了。”

Days 1 - 3: Fly to Beijing and Sightsee

The bikes were waiting for us at the Holiday Inn Lido Beijing when we flew up a month later:



An advance party had gone up with a professional mechanic to unload them from the containers, reconnect the batteries, and pour in enough fuel for us to get to the nearby Sinopec petrol station for fuel and air the night before riding off.

The paperwork for the whole group took hours to process:



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Provisional Chinese driving licenses had to be obtained for every rider; International Driver's Licenses are not recognized by Beijing.

Getting eye tests for our temporary Chinese driving licenses:



The rules on the back of the driver's license were clear:

临时入境的机动车驾驶人应当按照下列规定驾驶机动车：
1. 遵守中国的道路交通安全法律、法规及规章；
2. 按照临时入境机动车号牌上签注的行驶区域或者线路行驶；
3. 遇有交通警察检查的，应当停车接受检查，出示入出境证件、临时机动车驾驶许可和所持境外机动车驾驶证及其中文翻译文本；
4. 违反道路交通安全法律、法规的，应当依法接受中国公安机关交通管理部门的处理；
5. 发生交通事故的，应当立即停车，保护现场，抢救受伤人员，并迅速报告执勤的交通警察或者公安机关交通管理部门，依法接受中国公安机关交通管理部门的处理。

The vehicle's driver temporarily entering the border should observe the following rules:

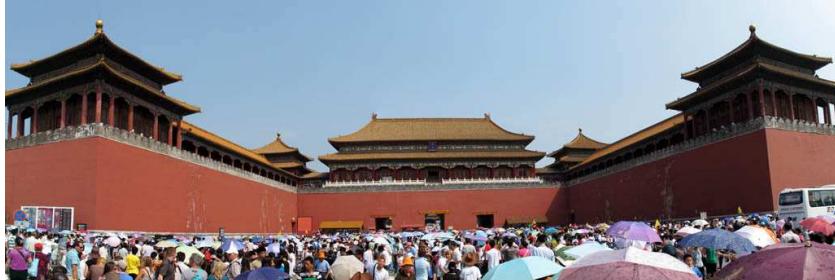
1. Abide by the laws, rules and regulations about road and traffic safety in China;
2. Drive within the areas or routes specified by the provisional border entrance license plate;
3. Stop the vehicle in case of police check and present valid border entrance document, provisional driving permits, original driver's license and its Chinese translation;
4. Observe the judgment by the Traffic Management Department of the Public Security Bureau in case of violating road and traffic safety laws, rules or regulations;
5. In case of a traffic accident, stop the vehicle immediately, protect the accident scene, rescue the injured and report to the traffic police officer on duty or the Traffic Management Department of the Public Security Bureau and observe the judgment by the Traffic Management Department of the Public Security Bureau.

L1: 00000706

We were not allowed to photograph the front of our driving licenses and we had to return them before leaving the country.

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Tiananmen and the Forbidden City—every place by tourist coach:



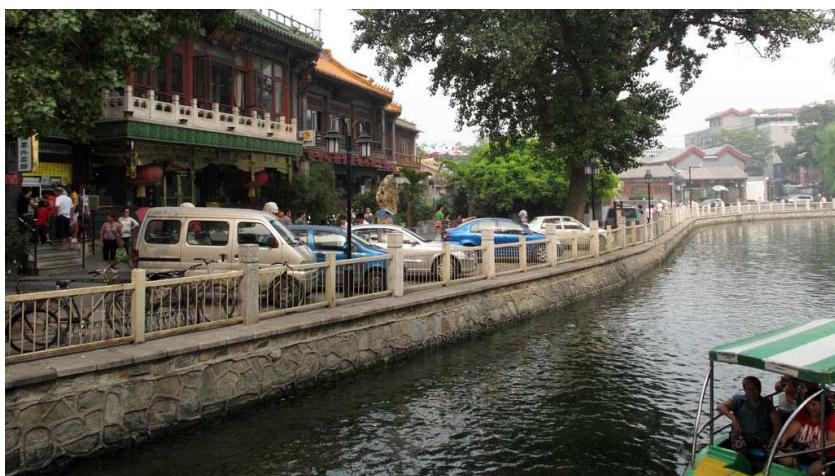
The Great Wall:



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Beijing has some scenic areas around the Hutongs (ancient alleyways):



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Our tour guide shared the common Chinese aversion to sunshine:



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A popular Beijing souvenir T-shirt, for men:



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A gridlocked intersection in downtown Beijing:



The cloisonné porcelain factory – a tourist trap impossible to avoid because the industrial-scale tourist restaurant (and our lunch) was located above it:



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The night before our departure, a temporary outdoor bar had materialized around our bikes before we returned from the Chaoyang Acrobatic Show—very convenient!



Day 4: Ride to Dezhau

Marshalling was done by six BMW riders. Their bikes were fitted with flashing blue strobe lights front and rear and looked more like police bikes than real Chinese police bikes.

Flag-off from the Beijing hotel—a time lapse of some of the bikes:



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Except when traffic was light, the group kept in a tight convoy, close together and two abreast when possible.

Within minutes of departure from the Beijing hotel, we had a near-death experience: in the center of the Beijing expressway on-ramp—right where a rider has to look over his shoulder to check the oncoming traffic—a manhole cover was missing! It had been stolen during the night. I swerved just in time to avoid falling into it at 70 km/h and losing the bike, my legs, my health, and perhaps my life.

At frequent intervals we stopped at toll plazas, where the minivan negotiated an unofficial toll for our prohibited motorcycles:



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The ride the first day was cold and wet. The Changzhou lunch stop:



Chinese Mr. Bean:



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The 390 km to the Fengou International Hotel took 9 hours. The bunker-style business hotel was a welcome reprieve from the rain and traffic:



The hotel thoughtfully provided soap, shampoo, a condom, and a phone call in Chinese from a woman in the massage center. I thought it was a wrong number.

Days 5 - 6: Ride to Jinan and Sightsee

Buying petrol at Sinopec:



The big bikes always drew onlookers:

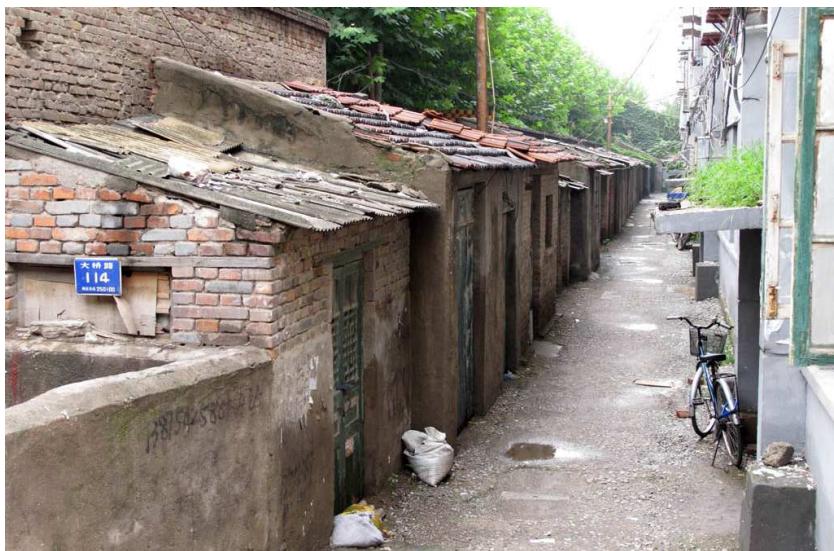


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The 117km ride to the Jinan Huangtai Hotel took four hours. The hotel:



... and the neighborhood:



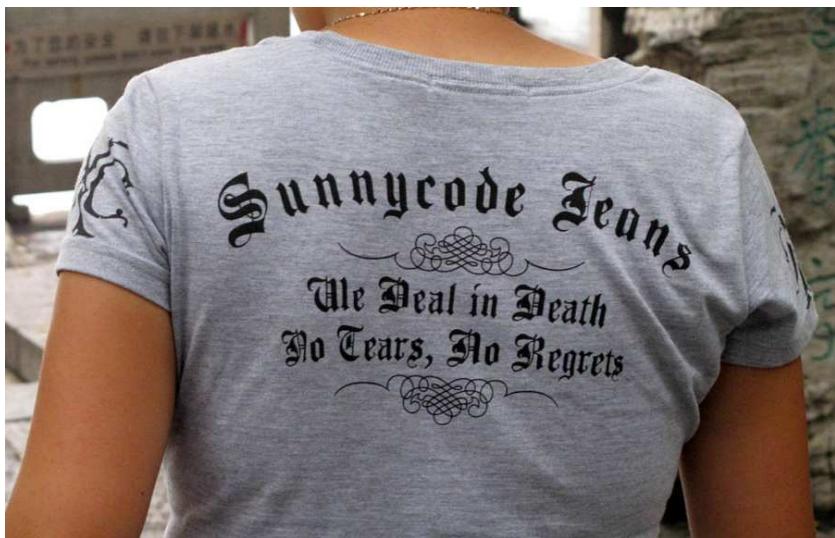
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Daming Lake and Baotu Spring Park:



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Around Jinan:



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Chinese aunties and uncles socialize separately:



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Don't mess with us:



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Tasty donkey meat:



And more everyday fare, which was loaded with monosodium glutamate:



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Beggars are common:



Imitations of popular western brands are also common:



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Jinan youth nightlife:



Chinese customer service:



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The Chinese are becoming People of Wal-Mart:



Some of the riders went for cupping therapy. Not me!



Day 7: Ride To Tai'An

The view from the hotel in the morning—another wet day ahead:



The traffic was not heavy and it was the shortest ride of the tour:



Check in to the Taishan International Hotel after only two riding hours:

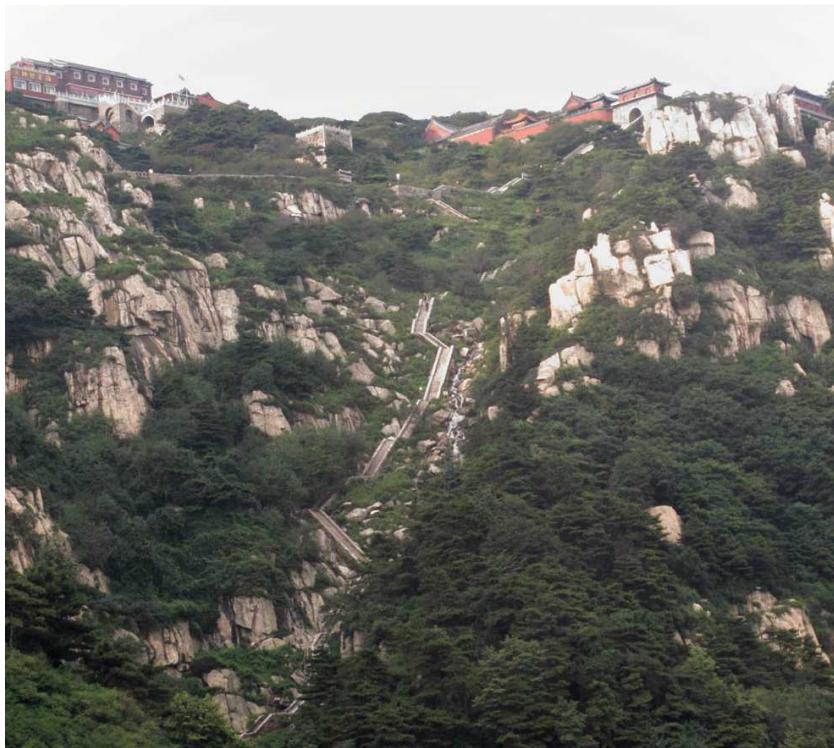


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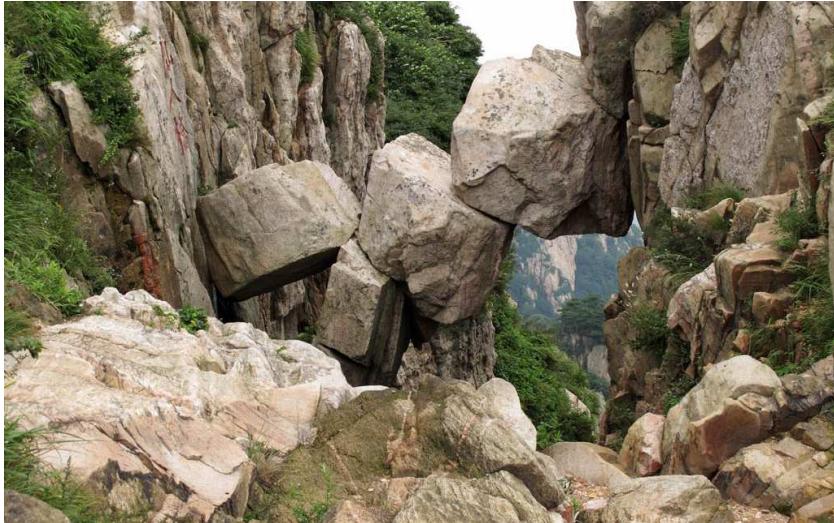
Then off to incredible Mount Taishan, a UNESCO World Heritage site, by coach and cable car:



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We had to line up for more than an hour to get back down the 1500m mountain on the cable car; that is the line-up:



These attentive officers had the difficult job of ensuring there was no queue-jumping:



Lager beer label. The Chinese must have a strange image of Germans:



And these signs gave us an amusing image of them—call the suit hotline!



Day 8: Ride to Xuzhou

Lunch was good fun, mingling with the onlookers on the other side of the parking red line after we ate:



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We stopped at the Han Juang Secondary School for a toilet break:



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Along the way:



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Stopping for a bike wash:



The 300 km ride to the Xuzhou Best Western Hotel took about 9 hours.



Days 9 - 10: Ride to Nanjing and Sightsee

The 415 km took 12 hours due to a Harley-Davidson motorcycle breaking down three times. We arrived at the Zhenbao Hotel well after dark:



请参加宴席或会议的
嘉宾由此至二楼

The distinguished guest who asks join the banquet or
convention is from this extremely the first floor

请勿酒后驾车

酒店提供代驾服务

Friendly sentiment is warned of
Do not please the drinking and
driving hotel provides generation driving service

Note the KTV hostess bar on the left, where many of the Chinese members of our group went to spend money on whisky and cognac poured by pretty girls in a noisy cigarette-smoke haze.

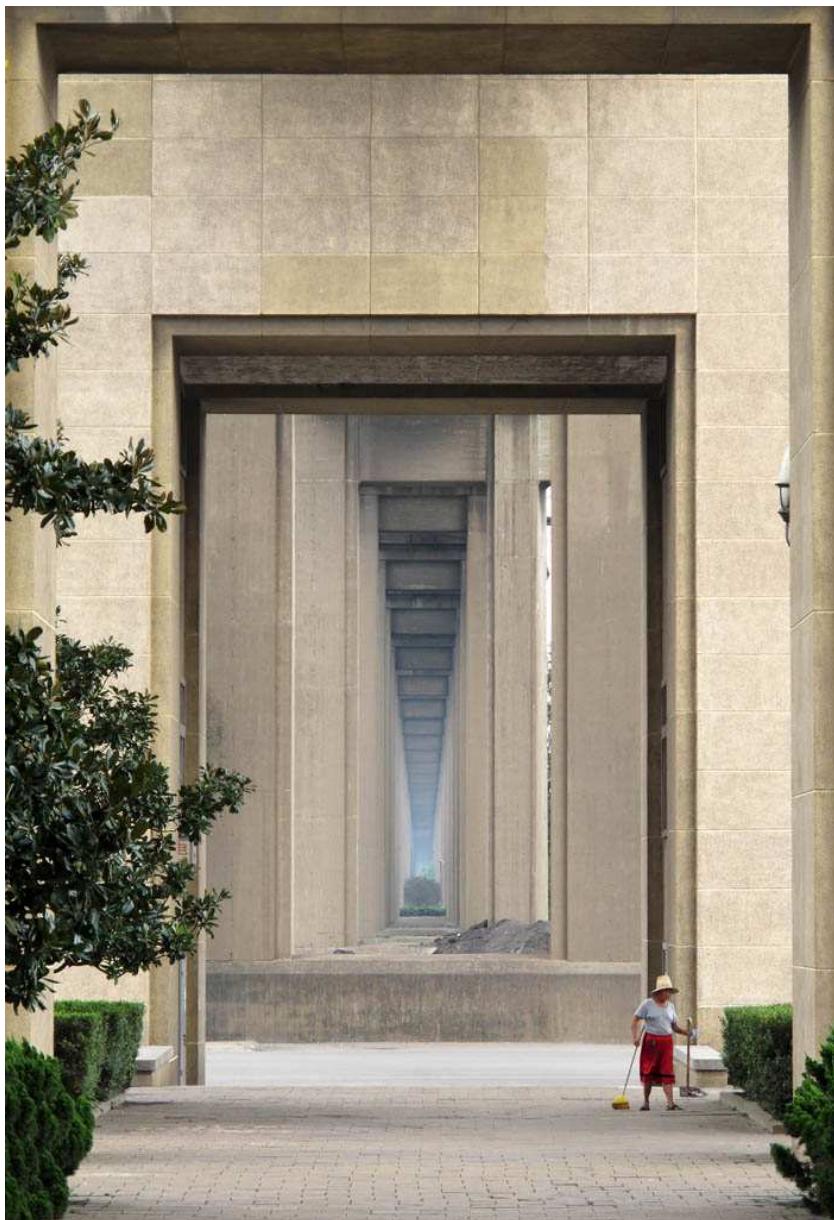
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Sightseeing the next day, by coach. The Yangtze River Bridge—which we had motorcycled over the previous evening in the dark and couldn't see—is 1.6 km long. It is impressive both above:



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... and below:





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The Qin Huai River:



Around Nanjing:



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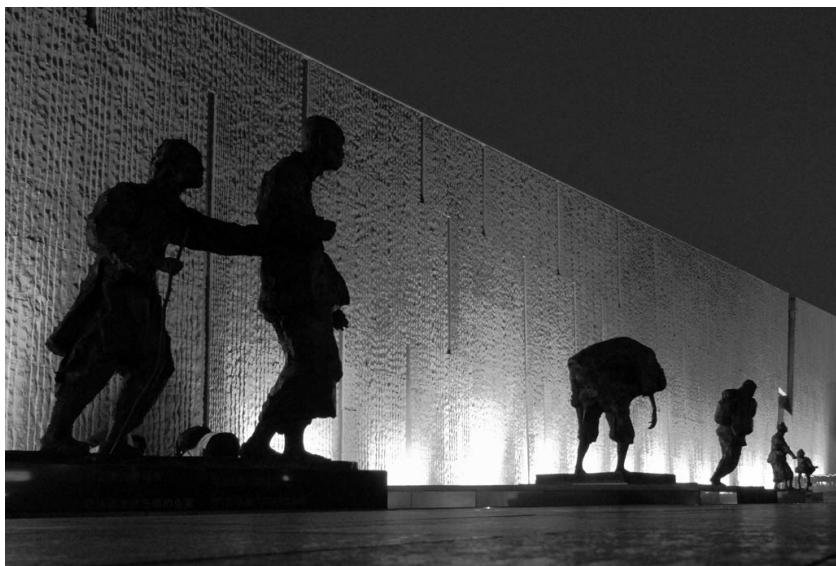


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Nanjing had many western chain restaurants:



Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall:



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Unfortunately it was closed when we arrived, but the many statues and dedication plaques outside were thought-provoking enough.

Wanda Plaza Nanjing, one of many large malls in the city:





Day 11: Ride to Wuxi

It was the hottest day of the tour, 42 degrees. This lead to the breakdown of the Ducati in slow-moving traffic. It went into the recovery truck next to the Harley-Davidson. Wuxi is known as the “City of Lights”:



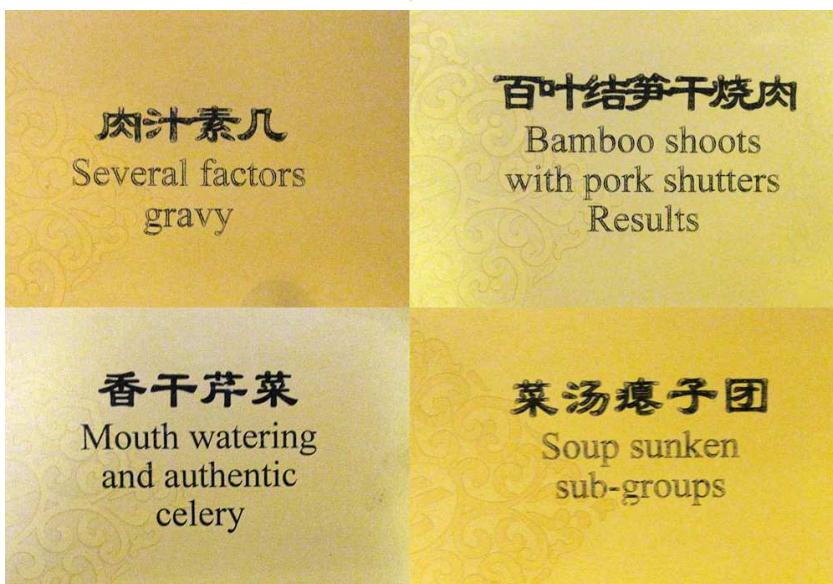
When coming into the town from the north the roadside streetlight display starts, and continues through most of the town.

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The hotel was impressive and modern:



But the food was mysterious to foreigners:



Days 12 - 14: Ride to Shanghai and Sightsee

Changjiang motorcycles at a petrol station:



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There is an internal border control checkpoint coming into Shanghai, as if entering another country. Partly due to enhanced security for the Shanghai Expo, it took two hours to process our papers before we could cross the city of Shanghai:

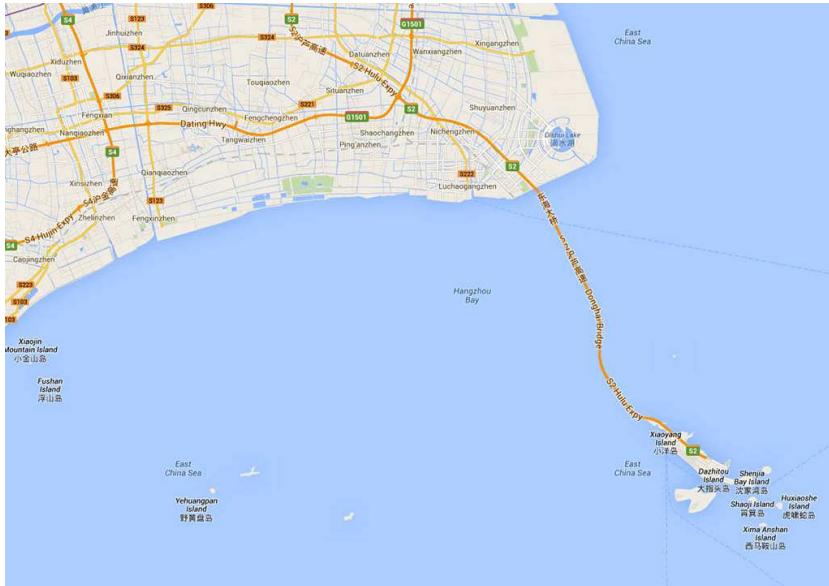


In fact, we bypassed Shanghai entirely. We rode on the Hulu expressway directly to the container port located in the bay on reclaimed land.

This 40 kilometer strip was one of the most dangerous rides of the tour; if anyone had gone down or broken down, it would have been a disaster for him—and for us. Narrow lanes, dense container truck traffic, no shoulders, continuous high speed, occasional broken glass and road alligators (retreaded tire fragments) on the road. My front tire was impaled by broken glass on the expressway and had to be replaced when I returned to Singapore, but fortunately it did not leak quickly.

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The terrifying Hulu Expressway to the Shanghai container port:



At around 3 pm we arrived at the port and helped each other to put our bikes back on their pallets for loading into the shipping containers.



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Then back into the coach and into Shanghai for sightseeing around the Pearl Tower, Bund, Chenghuangmiao, and Nanjing Walking Street areas:



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And, finally, the magnetic levitation train to the airport for our flight home, the fastest ride of the trip:



Looking Back

The logistics were flawlessly planned and executed, a credit to Team 27's event-management expertise. Although the route was the same as the ride 16 years previously, many of the old highways have become new expressways. The roads now have *ten to twenty times as much traffic*; the veterans who did the previous ride were stunned by the change. In Beijing, Nanjing, and Shanghai we experienced riding like this (Wikipedia photo):

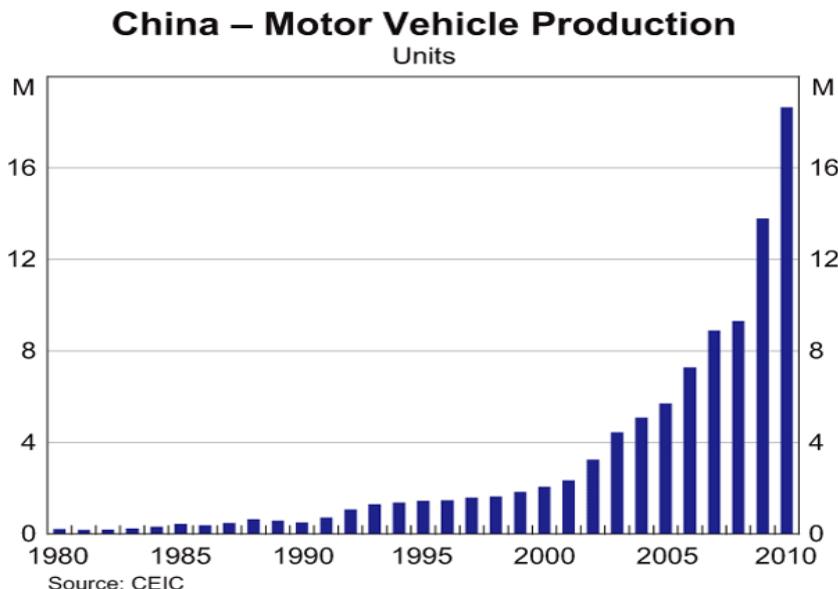


How many motorcycles do you see in the photo? None! Motorcycles are barely tolerated by the Chinese authorities.



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Here is part of the reason—explosive growth in car and truck traffic:



There were no hills and no curves on our trip; there were no viewpoints; and the highway motorcycle riding conditions varied from humdrum to horrifying. Because of the illegal status of our bikes, our tour could not be approved on scenic mountain backroads while staying in small hotels near town centers. We were invisible from the general population.

Although it was a short journey—a two or three day ride under normal conditions—it was demanding and dangerous due to unpredictable and often dense, bumper-to-bumper traffic. We saw nothing from the motorcycles: all our sightseeing had to be done from the coach.

We began to look forward to riding into construction zones and detours, where we might get a glimpse of a rice field or a village:



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At crossroads the Team 27 marshals—all on new BMW G/S bikes with blue strobe lights imitating police—attempted to keep side traffic from driving through red lights while our convoy was herded through the green lights. They were not always successful; a red light in China is a suggestion.

There were several near-misses when drivers decided they need to be on the other side of our convoy and simply drove right into the middle of the line of motorcycles expecting us to jump out of the way.

Motorcycles are near the bottom of the right-of-way priority sequence of truck/bus/car/motorcycle/bicycle/pedestrian. Chinese drivers could compete for being the world's most inconsiderate, and I make that statement having lived in many countries, including India. Chinese drivers have a lethal combination of ignorance and machismo, especially those driving black BMWs and Audis. Sights like this were not uncommon:



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We also experienced the scene below several times: traffic coming at us on the wrong side of the divided expressway ... in the fast lane!



It is a tribute to the Team 27 marshals that they kept two dozen bikes together in often very heavy traffic and there were no accidents.

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Shots from a helmet-mounted camera of the tour agency, in the black van, paying police to escort us down the highway with their flashing lights:



Lunches and dinners were all like this, tasty but overloaded with salt and glutamates and always served in a stinking blue cloud of cigarette smoke:



After a few days, the Caucasians and even some of the Singaporeans were looking for the nearest Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant clone:



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The toilet facilities along the way were often a shared experience:



We enjoyed receiving attention from passers-by, hotel staff, and reporters, most of whom had never seen so many big bikes before. News in Xuzhou:



My most memorable sight was to ride past a man walking along the six-lane freeway in the rain, *stark naked*, carrying his dry clothes in a plastic bag. Unforgettable scenes like this stay with us only as memories.

China

Beijing to Shanghai

14 days, 1740 km, 8 cities Aug 8 to 21 2010!

08 Aug Beijing (SQ)

15 Aug Xuzhou 300 km

09 Aug Great Wall

16 Aug Nanjing 415 km

10 Aug Tiananmen

17 Aug Nanjing

11 Aug Dezhou 390 km

18 Aug Wuxi 230 km

12 Aug Jinan 117 km

19 Aug Shanghai 200 km

13 Aug Jinan

20 Aug Shanghai

14 Aug Tai'An 88 km

21 Aug Singapore (SQ)



中华人民共和国万岁



世界人民大团结万岁



\$8,500 for rider/bike; \$4,000 for non-rider

Includes fare, hotel, meals, escort, backup vehicle, permits

Limited to 40 bikes with high capacity engine